

Children of the Deep Stone

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Beneath the Sky

20 000 years ago in a time before iron, before walls, before counting the years, the land breathed in its own silence in the lands of Grand Canyon. It was a world of stone, wind and thirst. The canyons ran deep like the veins of the earth, cut by time itself, their walls red with memory. Rivers whispered far below where no man's voice could reach, and the stone towers stood like sleeping beasts, watching the sun crawl its long path overhead.

The wide lands stretched unbroken, from the dry plateaus of the north where the wind moaned over salt-cracked flats, to the south where shadowed caves drank the cool of the earth. In the east, stone pillars rose from the desert like the bones of giants. To the west, forests clung to cliffs, their roots biting into the rock. These lands had no borders, no tribes yet carved from one another — only clans bound by firelight, by hunger, and by the stars.

It was in the deep heart of these lands — among the high ridges and narrow passes, in the canyon places where sun and shadow fought across the stone — that the people lived. Their homes were hides stretched over bone, caves dark with soot, and shelters carved into the rock itself. The fire was their center. Around it they spoke in low voices of animals seen, of signs in the sky, of dreams sent by the night. They knew the land not as a thing beneath them, but as something alive — watching, listening, remembering.

Their days were made of sweat and stone, their nights of smoke and stars. They hunted the great beasts that moved in dark herds across the grasslands, they scraped flesh from hides, cracked marrow from bone, boiled root and ash. They gave thanks. They gave blood. They gave names to what could not be seen.

This is the world before forgetting. Before division. This is the time of the canyon people — when the land was whole, and the fire still spoke.

The air hung thick with dry summer heat, and the grasslands shimmered under the ruthless weight of the sun. Dust clung to bare legs and drifted lazily between the sun-bleached bones of old prey scattered near the edges of the encampment. Tipis stood in a loose half-circle around the fire pit, their hides faded, stitched with sinew, painted with the long-told stories of hunts and mourning. Flies hummed over the drying racks where strips of red meat twitched gently in the warm breeze. The sharp scent of smoked fat mingled with the dry dust and the faint musk of the bison herds that loomed nearby, their dark backs like rolling stones on the golden plain.

Children shrieked and tumbled over one another, bare feet beating soft clouds into the earth, chasing a ring of bundled hide tied with sinew, their laughter sharp and wild. A woman with a square jaw and two long braids knelt at the edge of camp, scraping the

blood-gleamed inside of a bison hide with a curved stone blade. Her knuckles were darkened with old work, and her arms tensed with each pull. Next to her, younger women ground dried corn between smooth stones, their mouths tight with heat, sweat gathering at their brows, but none complained.

On a low, sun-burnished stone, the old man sat motionless, knees folded beneath the tangle of his age-withered legs, a thin plume of smoke rising from the bowl of his long pipe. His braids had long since gone gray, streaked like old bark. The lines of his face were carved deep, like canyon walls etched by time and weather. His eyes were pale with age, but they saw, still. They watched.

"Ahíyeye, waná wíyukse," he murmured, the smoke curling from his mouth as he spoke. "Now listen, children."

The boys who had been crouched in the shade of a nearby tipi snapped upright, the ring of their game forgotten. One of them, lean and lanky, his ribs sharp beneath his skin, shaded his eyes and squinted toward the elder.

"The bison," the old man began, his voice dry as the cracked riverbeds in high summer, "they do not give themselves easy. You must watch them for days. Their path is old — older than my father, older than his father before him. They follow it still. But when their hooves move together, the earth sings."

"Like thunder?" the youngest boy asked.

The elder's lips twitched into the echo of a smile. He sucked on the pipe, tapped the stem lightly against the heel of his hand, and nodded. "Yes. Like thunder beneath your feet. You feel it in your belly before your ears hear it. That is when you must be ready. You and the others, crouched low behind the ridge, wind at your back. They smell you, they run. You frighten them too soon, they scatter. You wait too long, they pass you by. You must be like stone — unseen, unmoving."

Another boy asked, "And the skins, Tǎšíyela? What then?"

The old man's voice lowered, his words slower, dragged like bone through ash. "Once the beast falls, you do not celebrate yet. Its spirit still listens. You cut only what must be cut. You peel the hide clean, start from the belly — warm, still wet, like birth reversed. The women take it then. Stretch it tight on the poles. Scrape it, smoke it. It becomes blanket, tipi, moccasin, shield."

"And if we waste it?"

The old man's eyes sharpened, milky though they were. His pipe hissed softly as he sucked once more. "Then the land turns away from you. The bison does not return."

From across the camp, the voice of a woman broke the dry lull, sharp as a coyote's cry.

"Heyá! Little Hawk, bring water! Your grandmother's throat is dust."

A boy sprang up, feet pounding against the parched earth, as he darted toward the wooden bowl set by the fire. A crow screamed overhead and flapped low over the herd grazing nearby — shaggy beasts with thick horns and dust-caked hides, moving slowly in the sun. One of them lifted its head, nostrils flaring, as if sniffing at the future. Its black eye caught the old man for a moment. The elder held its gaze.

"You must watch the herd with your whole body," he said, not to the boys this time, but to the sky. "They speak. They carry the old words better than we do. When they die, the wind carries their breath to the spirits, not your words. Remember this."

A woman dropped another hide across the poles, her mouth set in the tight curve of exhaustion. Children's laughter had quieted, and even the flies seemed to pause. Somewhere in the distance, the herd began to move, slow but steady, kicking dust into the still heat.

The old man stood at last, bones creaking, pipe still in his hand.

"Tomorrow," he said, voice rasping, "we follow. Tonight, we thank the bones."

The sun dipped toward the horizon, baking the grass to gold and stretching shadows long. The day was not yet over — but the old ways still held, for now.

The hides lay spread across a scaffold of sharpened branches, glinting faintly beneath the setting sun, their flesh side scraped raw and pale. Four figures bent over them, their backs broad as slabs of stone, muscles twitching beneath dark, weather-tanned skin, over two and half meters tall. Each of them stood head and shoulders above the others in the clan, towering like carved totems come to life. Their long black hair, tied back with sinew and beaded cords, fell down their backs in thick braids streaked with ochre and dust. Their voices were low and few, but their hands moved with the certainty of men who had done this since childhood — hide after hide, season after season.

The one called Tokánhi, whose name meant Stone Wind, moved the scraping blade with a slow, circling motion, his eyes half-lidded, focused. Beside him, Wíyak'a the Quiet Bear grunted softly, his hand raw from the blade's work, wiping sweat from his brow with a smear of bloodied hide. To their right, the twin brothers Mázahú and Chaská — Iron Horn and First Star — worked in rhythmic silence, their blades whispering over the stretched leather like serpents in dry grass. Their shadows spilled long behind them as the sun kissed the earth, vanishing with the heat.

When the last hide was laid to dry and the scent of smoke thickened from the fire pit, the four giants rose. They moved with the weight of blood-memory in their limbs, like trees grown from bone. Around the fire, others had already gathered. The elder, T̥hăth̥án̥ka Iyúhapi — He Who Binds the Bison — sat with the long pipe resting across his knees, its

bowl carved from red stone, etched with the lines of storms and beasts. He nodded to the tall ones, and without words they settled around the fire, knees drawn high, silence shared as respect.

Stars blinked into the darkening sky above, first the small ones, then the bright. The wind had died, leaving only the faint crackle of fat in the firewood and the soft breathing of the bison out in the distance. Smoke curled from the pipe like spirit trails, drifting toward the sky. The elder exhaled long and deep before passing it to Tokánhi.

"Watch now," he said, his voice hoarse but steady. "The stars shift tonight. Look above the east ridge. There — see the wings? The eagle rises."

Chaská, the youngest of the giants, tilted his head back. His voice, though deep, carried a thoughtful edge. "And there, just below — the snake stretches. It coils beneath the wing."

Wíyak'a took the pipe, puffed once, and exhaled through his nose. "They draw close tonight. Just as the old stories said."

Tokánhi passed the pipe to the elder again and looked toward the sky, eyes reflecting fire and starlight.

"My grandfather's grandfather," he said, "told me this. That long ago, before our time and the time of our fathers, there was the Canyon Clan. The blood of the giants. We are what is left of them. They carved their homes into the living rock, red stone walls that breathed the wind of the canyon, cool in summer, still in winter. They were taller than us — yes, taller — and their hair was red like the earth at sunset."

He paused, letting the others breathe in the memory with him. Tǎthǎŋka Iyúhapi watched him in silence, the pipe resting like an old bird across his hands.

"They were peaceful people," Tokánhi continued. "They knew the stars like we know the buffalo's trail. When the eagle attacks the snake —" he raised a hand toward the sky, following the slow drift of the constellations, "— it is not a battle. The eagle knows the rain is coming. Born of the skies, it sees what the snake does not. But the snake is old, it has lived beneath the world longer than the sun. The eagle does not strike to kill, it strikes to warn."

"The warning is sharp," Wíyak'a murmured.

"Yes," said Tokánhi. "But the drowning is sharper. The snake must wake, or the rain will swallow him in his sleep."

The fire cracked and spat as a log collapsed inward. The silence deepened with the stars. Even the children had fallen quiet, curled under hides, listening with wide eyes from the shadows.

"My mother's mother," said the elder slowly, "was taken in by the Red Rock Clan during famine. She said they spoke little, but their words were deep. She remembered their faces — calm, solemn, never loud. I was just a child when I saw the last of them. Old. He sat like a boulder near the cliffs, smoking alone, his eyes always on the stars."



Tokánhi nodded once. "They watched the heavens more than the earth. They saw the path of rain, the bones of winter, the hunger in the moon. They knew when the bison would fall, and when none would come."

"They are in us now," said Chaská, looking again at the eagle's wing climbing the stars. "Their blood makes our height. Their memory speaks through us."

The elder puffed the pipe again, then placed it gently on a flat stone near the fire, the embers inside glowing low like the eyes of old things watching from dark corners of the canyon.

"They were peaceful," he said once more. "That is why we joined them. Not for their strength. For their silence."

The wind stirred once, as if to answer, brushing through the camp like a whisper from stone walls long fallen. Above them, the eagle's wing neared the snake's eye. The night held its breath.

The stars were thick overhead now, burning bright against the deep black, as though a thousand small fires had been flung across the sky by some ancient hand. The fire in the center of the camp had burned down to glowing red coals, casting long, gentle shadows over the giant figures seated in the dust. The night was still, save for the distant snort of bison and the occasional hiss of wind through the tall grass.

The elder leaned forward, shoulders hunched like dry branches, pipe smoke curling from his nostrils. His voice came low and steady, like water running under ice.

"Our forefathers," he said, watching the sky as if the stars still remembered, "they spoke of the Star People. Tall, bright ones, clothed in light like flowing rivers. They came down from the path of the Seven Fires, riding upon the noise of the sky itself. They taught us things... how to listen to the roots before digging, how to coax the land into feeding us, how to call the calves from the womb of the mother without fear. They came with peace in their hands."

He paused, letting the silence thicken, then added, "They danced also. Not like us. Slower, and their feet never touched the ground. When they danced, the shadows stirred."

Wíyak'a grunted softly, shifting in the dust. "The shadow people?"

The elder nodded. "Yes. The dark ones. Not evil — but not of us. They hide in the edge of the world, between firelight and the end of the sky. They cannot be seen unless called. Certain songs, rhythms, the right drum made from elk belly stretched under full moon... then they come."

"What if we do not dance it right?" asked Chaská, his voice cautious.

"They do not come," said the elder. "Or worse — they come angry. That is why offerings must be made. Sweet root. Smoked bone. Sometimes the heart of a fox. They like rare things, things of smell and sorrow."

Tokánhi reached for the pipe, took it gently from Mázahú's hand, and drew in a slow breath. The fire glowed faint on his sharp cheekbones, on the red paint streaked across his chest. Smoke rose from his mouth like a second voice, and he spoke with it.

"I have seen them," he said, eyes still on the fire. "Not the shadow people — but the drawings. High on the red cliffs near the old canyon path, far from where even the goats

climb. The stones tell it. The Star People with long arms and tall heads. The dancers in black. And the marks of wind and fire between them."

He looked at the elder. "They carved the memory so it would not be lost. Our blood still carries it, but the stone carries it louder."

The elder gave a quiet nod. His hands, speckled with age spots and callouses, rested on his knees as though heavy with weight not seen.

"There was a time," he said, his voice barely above a whisper now, "when a spirit came not with dance, but with rot. It was drawn here — by mistake, maybe. Or by neglect. The clan had prepared a feast, a calling... but the offering was too little. No blood was spilled on the earth. No dance was held through the night."

"And what happened?" Wíyak'a asked, leaning forward.

The elder's mouth was tight. "They sickened. One by one. Fever in the lungs. Sores on the skin. Screaming at night, some. The children died first. Then the old ones. Only when my grandfather's father took a deer heart, split it open with his own hand, and danced without food, without rest, without drink — only then did the spirit forgive. The air cleared. The dead were burned. The survivors were half of who they had been."

Tokánhi's brow was furrowed now. His voice came slow. "Some spirits do not come to help. If you speak without knowing, or offer too little, they twist the gift into pain."

He looked into the embers and added, "There is a story among the canyon people. Of a spirit that lived in the water. Deep in the spring caves beneath the rocks. It drank gold — yellow metal the old ones used only for trade with Star Watchers. One season, the chief decided to give less. He said the water spirit would not miss it. He said the offering was waste."

The fire snapped then, sharp and loud. No one moved.

"The water vanished," Tokánhi said. "The spring ran dry. The river behind it shrank to a trickle. For weeks, the people scraped dew off stones in the morning and chewed grass to find moisture. Then the women took what gold remained — every last bit — and cast it into the cave mouth. The next night, the rains returned. Thunder cracked like anger, but water filled the canyon once more."

Mázahú took the pipe again, puffed slowly, passed it to Chaská, who did the same. Neither spoke, their faces calm in the flicker of dying fire. The silence between them was not empty — it was full of what had been said, and what did not need to be.

Wíyak'a finally broke it, his voice thick. "Do you think they still listen? These spirits, these star ones?"

The elder looked up at the sky. "They always listen. But they do not always speak. The question is not whether they are there — it is whether we remember how to be heard."

The fire gave a last sigh as a coal collapsed, sending a brief shower of sparks upward, like small stars returning home. In the distance, a lone owl cried from a crooked tree.

The night had deepened. The shadows thickened. The spirits listened.

The sun rose hard and gold over the open plains, its heat already creeping across the earth like a low fire, sucking the dew from the grass before a footstep could wet it. Morning sounds stirred within the village — the soft grunts of waking men, the stretch of leather over wooden frames, the creak of sinew-strung structures, and the distant snort of bison. Thin columns of smoke rose from cooking pits and hearth circles, mingling with the scent of boiled root and fatty broth.

A wolf pup howled near the edge of camp, chasing crows from the remains of yesterday's scraps. A child squealed and ran after the wolf, a bone rattle clutched in one hand, feathers bouncing on a string tied around his forehead. Women moved between tipis with pots in hand, fire-blackened and wide-mouthed, some already hung over embers where the stew simmered — marrow bones and root, with a string of dried rabbit meat floating in the fat.

At the far side of the village, beneath a crooked cottonwood, a man called Náp̃he Wí — Painted Palm — knelt with a block of dry cottonwood in his lap. A thin-bladed flint knife moved in slow circles under his calloused hands. Chips of pale wood fell in a soft pile beside him. The shape was beginning to show — the narrow head of a pronghorn, antlers bending back in a graceful curve. His lips moved in rhythm with the carving, whispering a quiet chant to the spirit of the animal as his hands worked, eyes half-lidded under the heat.

Near the animal pens, a broad-shouldered woman named Zintkála lyáya — Walking Bird — tended to the young bison calves with a switch in hand. She murmured gently as she moved among them, her long braids looped back and bound with red twine. Her dress was smeared with dust and the dark spatter of dung, but her eyes were calm. She checked hooves, rubbed fly ointment made from smoked ash and bear grease behind the ears, and muttered curses at one stubborn calf who kicked at her before she boxed its nose and sent it back to the herd.

Men moved in pairs toward the brush line at the east end of the plain, bows in hand, quivers slung across their backs, the light crunch of grass underfoot. One of them, younger, wore a coyote pelt tied at his waist. The older one, face lined with sun and wind, carried a spear as tall as himself, the tip bound with stone and bone. They said little. The hunt did not start with the chase, but with silence, with steps that left no sound.

Closer to the center of camp, Tokánhi knelt beside a low rack. A half-shaped bow lay across his thighs, its curve already pulled by fire and water, its body carved from the inner spine of

an ash tree. He ran his fingers along the grain, listening with his hands, then reached for a stone rasp and began smoothing the bend. Wood dust clung to his arms. A pile of sinew strands lay beside him, drying in the sun, ready to be twisted for string. Two boys watched nearby, mouths shut, eyes wide.

"You pull too far, it breaks," he said, without looking up. "You pull too little, it fails. You must listen to the tree, not yourself."

The boys nodded, not fully understanding, but understanding enough.

By the cooking fire, old Tǎthǎnka Iyúhapi sat with his legs folded beneath him. He held a bowl of bone marrow and root broth, blowing on it between puffs of his morning pipe. His eyes scanned the camp slowly, watching. A woman knelt beside him, mashing dried berries into a thick paste with a flat stone. Her arms were marked with old cuts, silver and long-healed. She hummed a low song that had no words.

Children darted between tipis, some dragging sticks, some tossing stones at imaginary enemies, one with a handful of dried leaves pretending to cast a spell. They screamed, they fought, they cried, they ran — the way children always had, and always would.

In the shade of a low rock shelf, Mázahú and Chaská stretched hides over a wooden frame, scraping them clean of the last clinging flesh. Mázahú paused once to drink from a water bladder, sweat darkening the front of his tunic, then handed the blade to his brother. They spoke little — twins did not always need words — but their work moved in rhythm, smooth as breath.

A short distance beyond, an old woman pulled reeds from a basket and began weaving. She worked by touch, mostly blind, her fingers remembering the pattern. Her lips moved, telling herself a story no one else could hear, something about a coyote tricking a bear, again and again, until they both drowned.

Above them, the sun climbed higher, the sky a hard, sharp blue. A line of hawks turned slow circles high overhead. From the direction of the forest, a long, low call rose — not alarm, but intent. The hunt had begun.

And the village, full of hands and breath and dust and voices, lived on.

The night was windless, heavy with the scent of ash and warm stone. The fire burned low in the circle, its light flickering against the tall hides of the tipis like slow, red breath. Above them, the sky stretched vast and cold, hung with stars that did not blink. The voices of the bison were quiet now, distant grunts rolling like thunder from beyond the dark rise of the hills. Only the crackle of firewood and the slow exhale of pipe smoke broke the hush.

The elder, Tǎthǎnjka Iyúhapi, sat hunched close to the flames, his knees drawn up beneath his robe, hands clasped around the long-stemmed pipe carved with eagle wings and winding rivers. His eyes were narrowed, staring into the coals.

“There is a change in the wind,” he said, his voice low and rough with age. “The rain has grown silent. The animals drink shallow from the pools, and their tongues find only mud. The grass grows in patches, dry at the root. This land does not speak like it once did.”

Tokánhi passed the pipe to Chaská, then looked toward the elder, his brow drawn.

“You see signs?” he asked.

The elder nodded slowly. “Yes. The earth has spoken through the small ones. Insects that once clung to the river rocks are gone. The tall blue-root plant, that needs almost no water, rots in the stem. The flies breed too fast, the frogs call too little. The air is hot even after the sun dies. And the beasts — they walk uneasy. I hear them at night. Pacing.”

Wíyak’a, his shoulders dark with smoke, his arms resting on bent knees, stared into the distance. “Where would we go? The herds need grass.”

The elder’s eyes turned upward, then down toward the earth.

“We must go where water still speaks,” he said. “To the canyon. To the stone homes our fathers left behind. The small river still flows there. I walked its edge two winters past — it runs shallow, but it runs.”

Wíyak’a’s brow furrowed. “The stone homes... They are steep. How will we take the herds?”

“We will not,” the elder said. “The beasts must stay above, on the rim where the grass still lives. We must climb. We must carry water to them. It will be hard. But thirst is harder.”

Chaská, sitting cross-legged with the pipe between his fingers, exhaled and shook his head. “That is a hard life. Up and down the stone face, every day. Carrying water. Climbing for meat.”

He paused. The others said nothing. Then he added, “But we have no other way. The pools are bones. The earth is telling us to leave.”

Tokánhi leaned back, his face lit orange by the fire. “Even the sun has changed. I feel it on my skin — not like before. It used to warm. Now it bites. It is too bright, like it burns angry.”

The elder nodded again, slowly. “Yes. The sky is no longer what it was. We watched the stars move, but now even the air beneath them shifts. The rhythm has broken.”

There was a long silence. A log fell in the fire with a dull thump. Sparks rose, floated, died.

“Tomorrow,” said the elder at last, “we begin to prepare. Not fast, not with fear. One week. Then we walk. Back to the old stone. Back to where the red-headed ones carved into the rock and waited for the rains.”

Mázahú, who had been silent all evening, finally spoke. “Will the spirits walk with us?”

“If we carry the fire,” said the elder, “they will find us. If we forget it, we will be alone.”

No one spoke again for a long while. The pipe moved from hand to hand. The stars turned slowly in the deep sky, and below them, the old blood gathered once more around fire and silence, waiting.

Return to the Stone

The morning came with a stillness heavy as stone, a sky hard and pale with heat already rising from the earth in slow, wavering breaths. The clan moved early, before the sun climbed too high, working in quiet purpose. Hide walls were rolled and lashed into bundles, poles unpinned from the bones of the tipis and tied together with sinew and rawhide. Ash from the hearths was scattered with quiet words, and the places where fire once burned were covered with sand and smoothed by hand — a gesture of farewell to the ground that had sheltered them.

The women folded blankets, bound clay pots with leather cords, packed dried meat and herbs into woven baskets. Children carried rattles and water skins. The old ones wrapped sacred stones and relics in hide. The four giants — Tokánhi, Wíyak’a, Mázahú, and Chaská — moved between the people with their great hands lifting heavy loads with ease, saying little. Only their eyes carried weight, watching the sky, the earth, each other.

Beyond the last tipis, others gathered the animals. The bison calves were coaxed forward with switches and calls, goats and dogs moved in restless circles, the elder women guiding them with sticks and whistles. A cloud of dust began to rise as hooves stirred the dry grass, and the scent of fur and sweat thickened the morning air.

When all was done, the clan gathered in a wide ring on the open ground where the fire had burned the night before. At the center stood Tǎthǎnka Iyúhapi, shoulders draped in a robe of elk hide, fringed and heavy with beadwork that shone red and blue and yellow in the sun. Feathers crowned his head, long and streaked with ochre. Others stood with him — elders, singers, and dancers — each adorned with sacred regalia: cloaks of raven feather, deer-hoof anklets, bone earrings, shells, shells that whispered when they moved.

The drums began, slow and deep, like the heartbeat of the earth itself. BOOM... BOOM... BOOM. Then the voices rose — raw and powerful — in a call and response that echoed across the dry hills.

“Hey ya... hey ya hey...”

“Hey ya hey hey yaaa...”

Rattles shook in rhythm, the sharp clatter of deer hooves joining the thump of the drums. A carved flute wept a high note over the chant, while one elder ran a rasp across a notched bone with a scraping cry that cut through the song like wind over cliffs.

The dancers began to move — slow at first. Their feet stepped toe then heel, knees bending, shoulders tilting forward with each pulse of the drum. They circled clockwise around the fire pit, solemn, unhurried. Fringe swayed with every movement, feathers stirred, metal cones on dresses jingled like distant rain. Some raised their arms as if reaching for something just beyond the sky, then lowered them again in offering. The dance was not for show. It was for the land. It was for the spirits.

Tǎthǎnka Iyúhapi led them in a voice that rasped like dry bark:

“Wóphila, land that held our feet...

Wóphila, water that kissed our mouths...

Wóphila, grass that fed our beasts...

We return your breath... and carry your name.”

The drums rose louder, then softened, slowing like a dying wind. The last calls faded into silence, and for a long moment, nothing moved. Then one by one, the dancers stopped, heads bowed, breath steaming faintly in the dry morning air.

When the circle was unbroken no longer, the people began to move. Packs were lifted, ropes drawn tight, water skins checked. The animals turned their heads toward the east, toward the rising dust of the trail.

By midday, the heat was sharp and unforgiving. The sun scorched the skin, and every step stirred the bitter taste of dust. The clan walked in long lines, the elders at the center, the children surrounded, the hunters flanking the sides. Bison and goats grunted as they plodded forward, and the dogs panted hard, tongues long and low.

They stopped once in the heat to drink and let the beasts graze, though the grass was thin and yellowed. At nightfall, they found a low rise where stone offered shade and the air cooled slightly. Fires were lit, meat was shared. No songs were sung — the day had taken too much.

On the second day, the sun rose meaner, harder. The sky was a blinding sheet. Even the birds had gone quiet. Sweat ran down backs, and the hides clung to the shoulders of the

carriers. The beasts grew restless, their eyes wide with thirst, snorting at the scent of dry riverbeds.

But the people moved. They did not cry out. They did not break. Their feet pushed forward through dust and heat, through thorn and stone. They carried not only bundles — but the memory of where they were going.

The canyon was ahead. Hidden still. But not far.

The days that followed pressed upon them like a heavy hand. Each sunrise burned hotter than the last, and though their bodies moved with patience, the land gave no softness. They followed the old trails where feet had once trodden for generations, where stone and dust remembered their kind. At each sun-fall they stopped, circling the wagging tongues of their beasts, unpacking the hides, lighting small fires to cook and smoke the meat they carried or found.

The hunters moved swift and silent beyond the trail, returning at dusk with meat on their backs. Jackrabbits with stretched limbs, desert bighorn sheep caught on the rocky slopes, a mule deer brought low by stone spear and quiet step. One man returned with a wild turkey in hand, its feathers still warm. A younger woman brought back a horned lizard, its head crushed, its skin stretched taut. Even the birds were hunted — one child carried a quail in his fingers, proud, though its weight was nothing.

Each night the meat was divided, cooked over embers and shared without waste. The old ones muttered thanks, the young ones gnawed bones, and the strong drank deep from the little water that remained. The beasts were watered carefully, watched closely. None complained. They had known worse, and now they walked toward the place of memory.

On the fifth morning after the dance, as the sun split the horizon in red, the earth opened before them. The canyon. Wide and vast, a great wound in the world, cut deep into the bones of the land. Wind rose from its depths like breath from a sleeping god. The river glimmered far below — silver, slow, winding through the stone like a whisper.

The clan stood in silence as the wind touched their faces, their hair lifted, their eyes squinted. T̥hăth̥h̥anka Iyúhapi raised one hand.

“This is it,” he said. “We have come home.”

The clan split then, as planned. Wíyak’a, Mázahú, and half the group led the animals up along the canyon rim, where grass still grew in stony patches and the earth did not yet forget to feed the beasts. T̥hăth̥h̥anka Iyúhapi stood beside Tokánhi and watched them disappear over the ridge.

“They will graze well,” said the elder. “And we will meet again — where the giants once lived.”

With that, the lower group turned, following the river's edge. The air grew cooler in the canyon's shadow, though the walls around them shimmered in heat. They walked seven hours beside the water, the path winding tight between cliff and river, carved from old stone. The cliffs above loomed close, and the canyon whispered.

Then, at last, they came to it.



Two caves opened into the rock wall — high, black mouths carved by hand and time. One of them bore a deeper darkness within, a natural cave joining the carved dwelling. Stone stairs, worn but steady, spiraled up the face of the wall. The clan looked up, faces calm, breath held. No words. Only movement. The four giants climbed first, slow and steady, bearing loads with practiced hands. Behind them came the others, elders and children lifted, baskets hauled by rope and shoulder. Each step was a return.

Inside, the carved walls bore witness to those who came before. Drawings etched in red and black — great beasts, clawed and hooved; spirals of stars; the wing of the eagle, the long form of the snake. There were handprints — many small, a few enormous — and figures locked in dances, in mourning, in war, in fire. Symbols of the spirits, old markings, all still visible as if waiting.

They reached the first cave and entered. Dust moved in the beam of sun slanting through the opening, but the place was whole. As before. The air held coolness and memory. Without command, they began setting the camp. Tipis rose slowly in the stone shelter, hides pulled tight, wooden frames anchored in clefts in the floor. A place for the main fire was

chosen — a natural dip in the stone circle at the cave's center. Some took clay buckets and ropes to fetch river water, voices low, hands steady.

By late light, voices echoed from above — then figures appeared at the canyon rim. The upper clan had returned, their animals settled among the grasses. One by one, they climbed down, hands gripping the old steps, eyes shining as they looked down upon the dwelling. When they reached the lower group, there was little said. They embraced. They drank. They sat together again by fire.

Thátǎńka Iyúhapi took the pipe in hand, drew from it, and exhaled.

"We have water now," he said. "And water is the blood of the earth. It is the breath of the plant, the gift to the beast, the voice that speaks when the land says nothing."

He looked at each of them in turn, his voice steady as stone.

"If the fire is our memory," he said, "then water is our flesh. Without it, no dance matters. No spirit hears us. We live now, because the river lives."

Tokánhi nodded. "We drink today," he said. "We give thanks tonight. But tomorrow, we listen to the caves."

And the fire crackled, and the cave watched, and the old walls breathed again.

Morning came quietly in the cave, not with wind or bird cries, but with the slow seep of golden light pouring through the narrow mouth in the stone. The clan stirred in shadows, voices hushed, feet bare against the cool earth. Smoke from the early fire drifted toward the ceiling, and the scent of roasted root and old embers clung to the carved walls.

Thátǎńka Iyúhapi stood already in the center of the main chamber, his body draped in ceremonial regalia, feathers bound at his shoulders and a ring of ochre painted across his brow. Around him, others gathered — men and women who bore the marks of age and memory, their garments adorned with beadwork, shells, bones. They formed a circle on the stone floor, and the drum began — not loud, but deep, a thud like distant heartbeats echoing in the hollow of the cave.

They moved together — slow steps, sun-wise around the fire pit, heads slightly bowed, arms raised and lowered in rhythm with the beat. Feet touched heel then toe, some raised knees high before stepping, others shuffled flat-footed, the dance weaving them into a single motion. Their voices rose in low chant, no words, only breath and call:

"Hey ya... hey ya heeyaaa...
Heya heyo... wó heyo ya..."

This was not a dance of joy, nor war. It was for the ghosts. For the forgotten. For the broken earth and what once stood whole upon it. For what must come again.

When it ended, there was no cheer — only breath. The dancers knelt, resting their hands on thighs, heads bowed. Tǎthǎŋka Iyúhapi passed the pipe, smoke curling into the rising heat of the chamber, carrying the memory of the dance upward.

Food was passed around — dried meat, ground seedcakes, boiled wild tuber mashed with herb. They ate quietly. The ghost dance left their limbs slow and thoughts deep.

Near the back of the main cave, a young man named Wíyuha, known for his quiet hands, took a stone and scratched at the wall. Curved lines, flowing like water, then the figure of a man with arms raised toward stars. Beneath him, the bison. Above, the eagle's wings. A memory carved into stone.

From the shadows near a fallen slab, a boy's voice rose.

"Elder... elder, come look!"

Tǎthǎŋka Iyúhapi rose slowly, his joints stiff from the dance. He moved toward the voice, followed by a few others. Behind a rock shelf, partially buried beneath old dust and stone chips, lay a skull — long and heavy, its forehead broad, its eye sockets deep and shadowed. Bones lay near it, thick as branches, one broken clean across.

The boy, eyes wide, whispered, "It is not an animal."

Chaská stepped forward, crouching beside the skull. He held his hand to it, then his forearm, then looked to Mázahú and shook his head. "This head... it is larger than both of ours together."

Tokánhi touched the edge of the bone, gently, then said, "This was one of them. One of the canyon blood. The red-headed ones."

Tǎthǎŋka Iyúhapi rested a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Leave it as it is. The spirit here is at rest. It waited for us."

After the meal, the elder gathered a group and made his way down the canyon steps toward the river. The climb was slow, the stone warm underfoot. The sound of the water grew louder, soft and steady like breath. At the edge, he stripped his hide robe and stepped into the stream, the cold biting up his legs and across his chest.

He let out a long breath. "This is the body's gift," he said. "We drink and live. We wash and are reminded we are only dust and water."

Others followed, splashing gently, cupping the water in their hands to drink. Some washed the dust from their hair, others just sat in silence, the current sliding around their legs. An eagle cried above — sharp, clear. It circled once, twice, its wings held wide, catching the heat.

Tokánhi waded further, diving beneath the surface where the current cut deeper. When he rose, water dripping from his hair and beard, his hands opened to reveal small shapes — dull at first, then shining in the sun. Gold. Nuggets caught between fingers and grit.

He climbed the bank and sat cross-legged in the shade of a low boulder, sorting the gold onto a flat stone. Nearby, he had laid a smooth bone awl and a small stone hammer. A leather strip waited. With slow care, he began shaping pieces — thin bands, small rings, rough beads. He worked without speech, the sun lighting his shoulders, his eyes narrowed in concentration.

Wíyak’a, nearby, scraped a strip of hide across a flat stone, shaping new soles for his feet. The old pair had cracked. His hands moved firm and sure, and he muttered, “These stones eat shoes like wolves eat bone.”

Without looking up, Tokánhi said, “Then you should walk on your hands.”

Wíyak’a snorted, not quite a laugh. “Only if my hands had eyes.”

From the river, the elder cupped another mouthful of water and drank. He looked to the cliffs where their tipis now stood inside the old caves. He nodded to himself.

“We have found what we needed,” he said. “The water lives. And so do we.”

The eagle cried again, turning above them like a thought that would not leave. The day burned on. The river flowed. And the canyon watched, unmoved.

Weeks passed and the stone walls of the canyon grew familiar again. The people settled into the breath of the place — days marked by water runs, food preparation, quiet repairs of tools and garments, the low humming of songs in the evening when the air cooled and the fire returned to the center of the cave. The sun remained harsh, but the river flowed, and that was enough.

Tǎthǎŋka Iyúhapi sat alone beside the river as he often did, his legs crossed, hands resting on his knees. He watched the water without thought, as one watches the slow flight of a hawk or the shifting of cloud-shadows on stone. Across the flow, the wind stirred nothing. The canyon air hung still and bright.

A sound broke the quiet — hooves.

Not the low thunder of a herd, but the sharp rhythm of a single horse.

He looked up.

A lone rider came into view, moving along the bend of the river, his body swaying with the motion of the beast. The horse was lean and dust-covered, its ribs drawn sharp beneath the

hide. The rider slumped forward, his long hair stuck to his face, eyes unfocused, mouth dry and dark.

The elder stood slowly, then began to walk toward him. He said nothing at first, only closed the distance.

The horse stopped. The man did not speak.

Then he tipped sideways and fell from the saddle like a sack of hide and bone, landing hard on the stony ground with a grunt that barely escaped his throat.

The elder's steps quickened. He knelt beside the man, placing a hand on his chest. Still breathing — faint, but steady.

"Where do you come from, brother?"

The man's lips cracked as he moved them. "From far... far... my clan..." His breath caught. "Táziĥu... clan of the dry fox."

The elder leaned closer. "What happened?"

The man's voice was barely air. "All gone... land turned to bone... no grass... no water. We tried to move, but the north... for days, weeks... nothing but dry stone. Not even flies. Cattle died first. Then the children."

He coughed, then pushed himself slowly, dragging his body toward the river.

The elder let him go. The man reached the edge and plunged his hands into the water, splashing his face, then drinking deeply, coughing as he swallowed too fast. Water ran from his mouth, and he wept, though his eyes were dry.

Třatřánka Iyúhapi stood silently, watching the man drink. The land had always been harsh — but this... this was different. The insects had vanished in their own canyon. The plants turned to rot. Now the far north turned to stone. The old balance trembled.

He reached down and helped the man to his feet.

"Come," he said. "You will not die here. You will eat. You will speak again."

He led him up the path, slow steps across the stone, back to the cave. The man stumbled, but walked.

Inside, the fire was low, and the air smelled of meat and smoke. A few women looked up as the elder entered, then quickly brought water and food. The man sat, eyes closed, chewing slowly, hunched over the bowl in silence.

Třatřánka Iyúhapi sat beside him.

“We also had to leave our camp,” the elder said quietly. “The rain is less, the insects gone. Some plants now die even when the earth is wet. The sun has changed.”

The man looked up, his face gaunt. “We danced,” he said. “We danced for seven days. No sleep. The drums cracked. But nothing came. We gave our offerings. Bones. Blood. The last of our honey. Still nothing.”

“The spirits may not be angry,” said the elder. “They may be waiting.”

“No,” the man shook his head. “They turned their backs. Even the sky would not look down. Some clans... they fought each other like dogs. Over roots. Over skins. Over meat gone green.”

The cave was quiet for a moment.

Třatřánka Iyúhapi passed him the pipe.

“Smoke,” he said. “The land has changed. But we have not yet forgotten how to be people.”

The man took it in trembling hands and drew from it. The smoke curled from his mouth and nose, and for the first time, he sat straighter.

“We were not meant to live this way,” he said.

“No,” the elder replied. “But we were meant to endure.”

The sun hung brutal and white in the sky as Mázahú and Chaská moved downriver, their skin already darkened and cracked by the weeks of heat. Sweat clung to their backs, but they paid it no mind. The gleam of gold had drawn them farther than usual, past the last of the known bends and into a stretch of the canyon few from the clan now walked. Both brothers carried stone hammers bound with rawhide and hide sacks slung over their shoulders, bulging with small rocks, river sand, and the occasional dull glint of promise. Their hands were stained with the riverbed — dirt, blood, and dust.

Chaská knelt by the edge of a pool, scraping gold flecks from a patch of silt into a curved piece of bark. “This sun,” he muttered, not looking up, “used to warm the skin like a thick blanket. Now it bites like fire ants.”

Mázahú, waist-deep in the river nearby, stood with water rolling off his chest. He shaded his eyes. “It burns through the air itself,” he said. “Even the stone is blistered.”

The brothers moved again, working up the bank, smashing open river rock and scanning the sandbars. Hours passed. Time broke under the rhythm of sweat, strike, sift. The river spoke softly, dragging the dust of ages across its stones.

Then, just as they rounded a crooked bend — where the cliff pressed tight and the water ran narrow beneath overhanging stone — Mázahú froze.

He raised a hand. “Chaská,” he said, voice low. “Look.”

At first Chaská saw only rock and shadow. Then he saw it — a figure standing perfectly still between two tall stones. Not man. Not beast. A tall creature, upright like a man, but scaled, rough-skinned like dry bark, greenish-black with faint gleam. Its head long, lizard-shaped, jaw heavy and eyes dark. In its clawed hands it held a long spear with carved bone notches along the shaft. It did not move.

Mázahú did not blink. His heart beat slow, deep.

“The elders spoke of them,” he whispered. “The Lizard People. First Fathers of the canyons. Invisible unless they choose to be seen.”

Chaská’s voice was tight. “They are not myth?”

Mázahú shook his head slowly. “No. They lived here before we were born from dust. Before the rivers even cut these stones. They watch us always — they hide their dwellings where no eye can see. The giants of our red clan saw them, long ago. The stories say they can vanish like wind, but walk the earth when it pleases them. They do not love men. Especially if we take too much.”

Chaská’s hands lowered. He did not speak again.

Together, they went to their knees. Then slowly, they leaned forward, pressing their foreheads to the hot ground.



They stayed like that, unmoving, for a long breath.

When they looked up, the lizard man was still there, standing without motion, the spear held upright as if rooted in the stone itself. Its gaze passed over them like a weight — no hate, no kindness. Only ancient stillness. Then, without a word, it turned. Two slow steps.

And vanished.

Not behind a rock. Not into shadow.

It simply faded — piece by piece — into nothing, until even the weight of its presence was gone, as if the air had swallowed it whole.

The river still whispered. The canyon walls still stood. But something in the light had changed.

Chaská stood slowly, brushing dust from his knees. “That was no vision.”

“No,” said Mázahú, still kneeling. “They walk again.”

He looked back up the canyon wall, toward the place of their dwellings, then at his brother.

“My great-father told the clan of a sighting, many generations past. One lizard man, standing on the far edge of a cliff. He vanished just the same. And before him, our red fathers — they saw them often. They said the First Ones lived deep in the rock, carved halls where no human could fit.”

Chaská wiped the sweat from his face. “Why now?”

Mázahú turned toward the river, eyes narrowing. “Because the earth is cracking. Because the old balance is shaking. They watch when the change begins.”

He reached down and scooped a handful of river mud in silence, then let it slip back into the stream. “We must not take more gold. Not here.”

Chaská nodded slowly. “We leave it. We say nothing.”

Mázahú turned back toward the path. “Let them know we bowed. Let them know we still remember.”

The two brothers walked away, their sacks still heavy with dust and rock, but untouched by more. The sun burned above them, and the stones watched in silence.

When Mázahú and Chaská returned to the canyon dwelling, the light was beginning to soften, the edge of the sun slipping behind the stone walls. They walked without rush, their feet sore from the river trail, their silence unbroken until they reached the upper mouth of the cave. Tǎthǎŋka Iyúhapi was there, seated beside the fire pit, smoke rising from his pipe in slow spirals. He looked up at them, eyes narrowing slightly at the stillness in their faces.

"You saw something," he said.

Mázahú sat on the stone beside him, lowering his gold-laden pack with care. "We saw one of the First Ones."

Chaská crouched, resting his arms on his knees. "A lizard man. Upright. Two-legged. Holding a spear. Watched us in silence. Then it vanished, just like the stories say."

The elder's pipe stilled in his hands. He stared into the fire a long moment before speaking.

"They are seen when the land is changing. When the bones of the earth shift in their sleep. They do not appear for men's eyes unless something deeper stirs."

He drew in the smoke, held it, then let it curl from his lips.

"They walked these canyons before man had fire. Before we had names. They do not live in the sun. They live inside the rock. Inside time."

Mázahú opened the sack and passed his hand through the gold they had gathered.

"We did not take more," he said. "After the vision, we left it."

The elder gave a single nod, then spoke low. "Good. No more is to be taken. Enough has been drawn. These stones are not ours. Gold belongs to the deep earth. The guardians do not share their marrow lightly."

That night, by the fire, Mázahú and Chaská worked the gold. They melted and shaped it carefully, pressing it flat with stones, bending it into rings and small disks. Each piece bore simple carvings — spirals, sun rays, feather lines. They strung some onto leather cords, others were pierced and shaped into earrings and bracelets. The women watched, eyes quiet, saying little, but their fingers brushed the jewelry gently, like touching riverlight.

The dwelling stirred with its usual rhythm. The twenty-five who lived there moved through their tasks with the slow steadiness of those who have adapted to hunger and stone. Two women ground seeds into flour with river-worn stones, their elbows working in rhythm. A man scraped hair from a drying hide with a sharp flake of obsidian, the rasping sound filling the air. Three young boys repaired a cracked water skin, sealing it with boiled tree sap.

High above, on the edge of the canyon rim, two men climbed with clay buckets strapped to their backs. Their legs burned with each step, their hands raw from gripping the sun-warmed stone. They made ten rounds before sundown, backs bent, knees shaking. Their breathing turned to gasps, but not once did they speak of stopping. The animals above waited — silent, staring — and were given water from sore hands.

Inside the cave, Tǎthǎŋka Iyúhapi sat with his pipe and began to hum. The words came slow, drawn from deep memory — an earth song of the old ones, of the first breath and the

first step, when the land still recognized its children. The sound was low, a hum that curled like smoke, barely above the wind.

“Hanáa yuhá, táku owán,
Mičházan anpétu kin lél,
Wí yawá, makhá oyánke,
Táku šni, hé táku čhuwé...”

He sang not for the people, but for the land itself — to let it know they remembered. That they still walked with respect. That they still carried the fire. A soft wind stirred his hair. Nearby, three children sat quietly, watching him, the firelight flickering in their eyes. They did not speak. They did not move. They only held small pebbles in their palms, and listened.

Deeper in the dwelling, where the carved tunnel opened into the natural cave, Tokánhi and Wíyak’a prepared a torch. They bound dried moss to the end of a stick, dipped it in fat, then lit it with a coal from the fire. The flame flared orange and steady.

“Ready?” Tokánhi asked, glancing into the dark.

Wíyak’a nodded, holding a second torch unlit in his hand. “If the river hides in there, it will be colder, purer. Maybe even deeper.”

They stepped inside.

The cave narrowed at first, then opened wide into a tall chamber with stalagmites rising from the floor like the teeth of old gods. The torchlight flickered on the walls, revealing mineral streaks — red, green, white. The air was cool, almost damp. It smelled of stone and age.

Their footsteps echoed. The walls wept in places. They passed tunnels that branched and bent, some going sharply downward, others rising in tight curves.

“Feels like walking into a mountain’s mouth,” said Wíyak’a, running his fingers along a smooth stone wall.

Tokánhi crouched and touched a patch of the floor.

“Water passed here. Not long ago.”

They moved deeper, past a jagged rock that looked like a claw, past ceiling shapes like curtains frozen in stone. At one narrow bend, they heard it — the faint trickle of water, deeper still.

They exchanged glances.

“We keep going,” Tokánhi said.

Wíyak'a lit the second torch and held it high.

"If there is a spring down here, I hope it is still running."

And the cave swallowed their voices as they stepped forward, firelight dancing on walls that hadn't seen it in generations.

Tokánhi and Wíyak'a moved slowly, the tunnels winding and rising like the insides of a living thing. The cave breathed cold air from its depths, whispering through narrow cuts in the stone. Their torches burned low but steady, casting dancing shadows against the jagged walls. Water sounds grew louder with each bend — not rushing, but a gentle trickle that echoed in the silence.

"This way," Tokánhi whispered, motioning with his torch.

Wíyak'a followed, the heavy clay bucket tied across his back, swinging gently with each step. His fingers brushed the walls now and then to steady himself. They climbed a rough incline where mineral veins ran like veins in old skin, and then the stone opened before them.

A shallow basin of crystal-clear water lay under a low ceiling, fed by a spring trickling from a crack in the wall. The surface was still, untouched, and the air above it was sweet with a clean, cold scent.

They stopped.

Tokánhi knelt first, staring into the water. "This is it," he said, voice reverent. "The breath of the canyon itself."

Wíyak'a unslung the bucket carefully, kneeling beside him. They both dipped their hands, forming bowls with their palms, and drank.

The water was alive — colder than any they had tasted above, fresh like the first snow melted, like wind at dawn before fire, like something untouched by time.

"This is not river water," Wíyak'a murmured. "This is older."

Tokánhi nodded. "This comes from underground" he said.

Wíyak'a filled the bucket slowly, careful not to spill. "Let the others taste this once."

When they returned to the cave, the bucket still cold against Wíyak'a's back, the clan gathered quickly. Mouths were dry, faces dusty. Each person took a turn, cupping the water and drinking it with both hands, their eyes closing with the first taste.

Even Tháthánka Iyúhapi, who never rushed for anything, moved forward when the water reached him. He took a long drink and exhaled slowly.

“This,” he said, “is the river before the first rain. This is the water that was sung into the world.”

Above, the sun still scorched the canyon rim. Two men, their skin darkened by weeks of climbing, scaled the wall once more with knives and rope. They found a young bighorn goat from their herd and slaughtered it swiftly, offering thanks. Blood ran down the stones as they dressed the meat, then packed it into buckets, lowering it down with rope to waiting hands below.

The women received the buckets without words, their hands practiced. They lit new fires at the edge of the cave, sliced the meat thin, rubbed it with ground seed and salt, laid it across hot stones. Some boiled grass brought from the rim, dark and thick, and served it in carved bowls with the meat. Smoke curled into the air, heavy with scent.

Children ate first. Then the old ones. Then the hunters.

Clouds gathered above the canyon — not thick, but enough to cast a pale gray over the red stone. The wind shifted. The air smelled of rain before the drops came.

And then it fell.

At first light, like dust. Then harder, warm rain slapping against rock, splashing into the river, pattering across the tipis and hides. The children screamed with joy, jumping barefoot into the puddles, chasing each other, hair plastered to their faces, their laughter echoing against the canyon walls. Some of them tilted their heads back and opened their mouths to drink the sky.

Tǎthánka Iyúhapi sat beside the fire, pipe glowing, the smoke curling under the cave mouth. He said nothing, only watched. The earth was speaking again. For now, it whispered in water.

Two men fished by the river’s edge, casting their lines between the rocks with spears in hand. One pulled a fat river fish from the shallows and gutted it with smooth skill. They talked quietly about the rain.

“We should give thanks tonight,” one said.

The other nodded. “We already did.”

Farther inside the cave, three men worked with stone. They had begun hauling larger rocks from the riverbank, stacking them carefully at the wide mouth of the cave. One smeared river mud thick between the stones, sealing the gaps. Another chipped edges flat with a stone hammer.

“This will hold wind back,” one said, pressing mud into a gap.

“And mark our place,” said another. “A doorway. Not to close — but to tell the canyon we remain.”

Rain continued to fall, tapping against stone and skin, soaking hides and smoothing footprints. It fell with rhythm, like a song the land had not sung in many weeks.

And within the cave, the fire crackled, and the clan moved in the slow, deliberate way of people who endure.

The rain thickened as the day aged, falling in long, loud sheets that swept across the canyon like the flapping wings of some vast spirit. The river churned dark and swollen, its surface broken by heavy drops and the whirling rush of debris from the upper slopes. Lightning flashed high above — sudden white arcs that split the gray sky like cracks in the world’s ceiling. Thunder rolled after it, sometimes near, sometimes far, echoing through the great stone valley, rattling small pebbles loose from ledges and cracks.

Wind came next, tugging at the rim of the canyon, rushing down in swirling currents. At first it was playful, like a dancing boy. Then it grew bolder, scraping the canyon walls with long, hot fingers. It roared down the cave mouth, but the stone wall the men had built at the entrance dulled its breath, turned it into a long whisper. Inside, the fire flickered wildly but did not die.

Tǎthǎŋka Iyúhapi sat wrapped in a thick hide, his pipe smoldering slowly. He watched the fire, nodding at the hiss of rain on stone.

“This will wake the grass,” he said. “The animals above will eat well.”

Mázahú poked at the flames with a stick. “As long as the wind doesn’t blow them off the ridge,” he muttered. “That gust nearly knocked me over when I stepped out to check the buckets.”

Chaská wiped water from his brow and leaned back against the stone wall. “You should tie a rock to your back next time. Might keep you on the ground.”

A few chuckled. Children lay curled on hides near the inner wall, eyes heavy, limbs limp, the storm too loud now to fear.

Wíyak’a pulled a roasted root from the coals and tossed it between his hands. “When the rain lets up,” he said, “we’ll need someone to go above and gather more grasses. Roots too. This storm may loosen the soil.”

“We’ll go,” said Tokánhi. “Give it two days. Let the earth drink first. Then we’ll pull what it’s ready to give.”

One of the women, Máhpíya Wičháǰpi, stirred a pot with a carved bone spoon, watching steam curl upward. “We’re low on saltweed. And the small bitter root — the one the elder likes for his tea. Haven’t had that in two moons.”

“It grows near the edge,” said another woman, Kítá. “Dangerous ground. Wet stone now. Someone careful should go.”

The elder’s eyes lifted. “Take only the sure-footed. The roots aren’t worth broken bones.”

“Then not Chaská,” said Wíyak’a, grinning.

Chaská grunted. “I’d outrun you downhill with a bison on my back.”

“You’d fall and roll like one,” Tokánhi laughed.

The elder drew from his pipe and exhaled. The smoke coiled up into the damp air, touched by firelight and stormlight alike.

“We speak of roots and jokes,” he said, “while the sky pounds its drums. That is good. Let the storm pass, and then the land will speak again. We’ll know what to do.”

The wind howled past the stone wall. Rain lashed the outer rock like claws against a drum, but the people stayed close to the warmth, their voices steady, their laughter low. They spoke of when the meat would be ready to dry, of when the goats would be heavy with milk, of a new baby coming to one of the women before the leaves returned.

The storm did not stop. It stayed with them through the day — not cold, but heavy, warm rain that soaked the earth yet gave no chill. The air steamed inside the cave, thick with smoke, wet stone, and the scent of cooking roots and drying hides.

And still the people waited, as they always had — not in fear, but in rhythm, part of the same storm, the same stone, the same breath of time.

The storm passed slowly, leaving behind a strange stillness in its wake. The canyon walls steamed under the returning sun, and the river ran darker, swollen with clay and silt. Days went by without thunder, but the air remained heavy, and an unease crept into the limbs of the people, like an ache before sickness.

On the third day, a group of men rose early, ropes and baskets slung over their backs, and climbed the narrow path toward the canyon rim. Their climb was silent. No jokes. No talk. Only the scrape of hide soles on stone and the faint clatter of climbing tools.

When they reached the top, the light was sharp, and the wind low. What met their eyes froze their steps.

All across the ridge, where once the green had stretched in coarse patches for grazing — yellow.

Not dry. Not the golden brown of old grass in season.

But yellow and soft, sagging like wet hide. The roots were black at the base, the blades curled and breaking apart in their hands. What had been rain-fed was now rotted. The soil underneath smelled of mold. And around it, their cattle stood still, ribs sharp, eyes dull. They pawed the earth listlessly, searching, chewing nothing.

One of the younger men, Wiyóhiya, dropped to his knees. He pulled at the yellow stalks, tossed them aside, reached deeper into the soil, and struck only rot. His hands shook. Then he sat back and covered his face with both hands. His shoulders heaved. He made no sound, but tears fell into the mud.

“We have to dig,” said Tokánhi quietly. “There may be roots deeper.”

They moved slowly through the ridge, digging where the slope met rock, where rain might have run clean. They found some roots, pale and still firm. A few handfuls. They wrapped them in wet cloth and placed them in baskets. No one spoke as they climbed back down.

At the cave, Tǎthǎŋka Iyúhapi sat by the fire. His eyes lifted as the men entered. He saw their faces before they spoke.

Tokánhi stepped forward. “The rain has rotted the grass. The soil’s gone foul. Animals stand but do not eat.”

The elder was quiet for a time. He took a draw from his pipe, then held the smoke in his lungs before exhaling slow.

“This is not the old rain,” he said, voice low. “This is something twisted. The sky gave water, but not life. Something is wrong in the wind. The spirit of rain has turned.”

Chaská sat nearby, brow furrowed. “What does it mean, Elder?”

Tǎthǎŋka Iyúhapi looked into the fire. “It means we must act like men, not children. If the animals do not eat, they will die. Their meat will rot. Their hides will be food for flies. We must take them now. Dry the meat. Save what can be saved. Hard times are no longer coming. They are here.”

The decision was made before the sun reached its peak. Ten men climbed the cliffs again, this time with blades, ropes, and buckets. They moved with heavy hearts. Not one of them looked the animals in the eyes.

The first goat fell quickly. A clean cut across the throat. Blood spilled into the dust and ran down the slope. Hides were stripped, meat carved, sliced into long strips and packed into buckets. They worked fast and hard, arms slick with blood, the wind carrying the smell down into the canyon.

Some of the goats cried. Others stood still, as if they understood.

One woman, Niská, stood below with her hands over her mouth, tears rolling down her cheeks as the first bucket of meat came down the cliff on rope. She turned and walked away.

By nightfall, the cliff was red and wet. All cattle were gone.

Hides were laid out on flat stones to dry. Meat was smoked and hung on wood racks. Bones were set aside. No piece was wasted.

Třatřánka Iyúhapi sat away from the fire, near the stone wall at the cave mouth, the pipe cold in his hands. He whispered into the wind, barely louder than breath.

“Rain spirit, forgive us. If we have offended, let the wind tell us how. If we have forgotten, remind us in dreams. This is not your gift. This is your anger. Speak to me.”

No answer came.

The fire crackled. The cave held its silence.

And outside, the sky turned the color of ash.

When the Sky Turned Black

The days that followed were heavy with work and dread. Strips of meat hung from wooden racks deep inside the tunnel, where the air stayed cold and unmoving. Clay jars were sealed with fat and resin, baskets stacked carefully against the stone walls. The smell of drying flesh mixed with damp rock and old smoke. People moved quietly, counting without numbers, knowing by instinct how long such stores could last.

Then the sky darkened again.

Clouds gathered thick and low, pressing down on the canyon like a lid. The wind rose sharp and uneasy, scraping the stone walls with long howls. When the rain came, it was wrong. It stung the skin, carried a bitter scent, and fell hard enough to splash pale marks into the dust. The river foamed strangely, and before long, fish began to float to the surface, their silver sides dull, mouths open, eyes clouded.

A woman cried out softly when she saw them. Another covered her face with her shawl and turned away. Children clung to their mothers, wide-eyed, as thunder cracked through the canyon, louder and closer than before. The echoes bounced back and forth between the stone walls, making it seem as though the sky itself were breaking apart.

The storms no longer passed with the day. They lingered into the night, thunder rolling again and again, lightning flashing pale blue through the cave mouth. Sleep came only in fragments. Children whimpered and startled awake with each thunderclap. Even the adults lay tense on their hides, listening.

Třatřánka Iyúhapi sat apart from the others, pipe glowing faintly in the dark. Smoke curled around his lined face as he stared into nothing. The rain hissed outside like something alive.

When the storm eased enough for voices, the elder gathered Mázahú, Chaská, Tokánhi, and Wíyak'a near the fire. The others kept close, pretending to work, listening all the same.

"If the grass and roots rot," the elder said quietly, "and we have meat only for so long, then we stand at the edge. If the rain kills the land here, it does so elsewhere. We cannot return to the old plains. Our people are in danger."

Wíyak'a rubbed his hands together, restless. "Something has gone wrong. Not just here. The earth itself is shifting. You saw the eagle and the snake cross in the sky. The old ones said that crossing does not pass without change."

Mázahú took the pipe from the elder, drew from it slowly, and exhaled. "We have no cattle now. No grass. Without beasts, without roots... our tribe will thin. That is not fear speaking. That is the truth."

Tokánhi said nothing at first. He stared toward the cave wall where the old carvings watched them silently. "If the land is dying everywhere," he said at last, "then running will not save us. Only understanding might."

A voice rose from the shadows near the fire. It was the man who had arrived weeks earlier on the dying horse. His face was still drawn, his eyes hollow, but his voice was steady.

"In the north," he said, "there is no grass at all. No rot. Only dust. The rivers are bones. The animals fell first. Then the children. Then the strong fought each other for scraps. This change does not pass with a season. It stays."

A murmur spread through the cave. A woman whispered a prayer. Another clenched her jaw, staring at the ground.

Chaská spoke low. "If this is lasting, then what are we meant to do?"

The elder did not answer at once. He lifted the pipe again, smoke rising slowly toward the stone ceiling.

"We listen," he said. "We endure. We do not scatter like frightened birds. Panic feeds death faster than hunger."

Outside, thunder rolled again, long and deep. Rain struck the stone with renewed force.

Women drew their children closer. Hands tightened around bowls and tools. No one spoke for a long time.

The fire burned low, and above it the old carvings watched, unchanged, as restlessness moved through the clan like a shadow with no shape.

The days bled together under a sky that forgot the color of peace. Each morning, if morning could still be named, came with black clouds rolling over the canyon like smoke from a burning world. The winds screamed through the stone corridors, funneling with such strength that small rocks were lifted from the ground, scattered like leaves in autumn. The cave mouth howled day and night. The people no longer stepped beyond it.

The rain came like falling rivers — thick, yellow-tinged, stinging the skin and burning the eyes. Some had tried to fetch water from the river early on, but their hands came back reddened, the water spoiled. Now, only the tunnel spring was used, its flow still cold and pure, deep within the mountain's breath. The meat was still intact, the jars sealed, roots kept dry, but all knew it was only enough to hold them for some moons, no more.

The men had tried again to seal the wall — stretching hides, anchoring them with stone, tying down the edges with rope and bone pins. But the wind tore at it mercilessly, flapping the skins like wings of hunted beasts. Two men had fallen trying to stand near the mouth, forced to crawl back inside, bleeding from their hands.

Nights were worse.

Thunder tore across the sky with such violence that it shook dust loose from the cave ceiling. Children sobbed into their mothers' arms. Even the elder sometimes pressed a hand to the stone beside him, as if listening for something beneath the noise. The people did not sleep, only dozed in brief stretches, one eye always on the fire, the other on the dark beyond.

Then, after three weeks of storm, a strange stillness came one night. The wind lessened, though it still moaned far down the canyon, like a wounded creature too tired to scream. The rain slowed. Clouds thinned.

And through the jagged teeth of the cave mouth, stars appeared — not many, but sharp, and red, burning against a sky the color of dried blood.

The clan gathered in silence.

Třatřánka Iyúhapi looked up, pipe in his hand, eyes reflecting the dim starlight.

"Dark times are upon us," he said. "This is not a season. This is not a storm. The change is upon the world now, and we are within it. Our tribe stands on a shaking earth."

The people huddled near the fire. Some women wept softly, their faces hidden under shawls. Children clung to their legs. Mázahú put more wood on the fire and looked into it as if searching for signs.

Then they began to dance.

It was not joyous — a slow, solemn circling of the fire, feet barely lifting from the stone, a movement older than memory. Songs rose, cracked and low, the voices of the women soft and wavering, the men grounding the rhythm. They sang the songs of the Land Spirit, the Rain Keeper, the Deep Stone, the songs only used when the breath of the world grew thin.

Drums were beaten with tired hands. Rattles shaken slowly. The dance did not chase away the fear, but it gave shape to it, and so they danced deeper into the night.

A comet was spotted searing across the sky without sound — a glowing tail of light that split the heavens from east to west. Every head turned upward. Its pale flame burned longer than any star, its motion slow, deliberate, undeniable.

Třathánka Iyúhapi stood, pipe clutched tightly.

“This,” he said, “is one of the four horsemen. My grandfather’s grandfather spoke of it. When it comes, the earth turns. More may follow.”

Tokánhi dropped to his knees, his forehead to the stone.

“Waníyetu třawícutapi... Oíyokiphi šni,” he murmured. “Oíyokiphi šni... wíyakA třawá wanží yuhá šni...” His voice trembled. “Forgive us. We did not see. We did not know.”

Others joined him, bowing low, whispering words to whatever spirits still listened. The cave was thick with smoke, sweat, and desperation.

From that night on, the clan no longer touched the river. The acid rain had fouled it; the fish within had gone soft and pale, already rotting as they floated. The elder had walked to the bank once, looked at them, and shook his head.

“They are not food now,” he said. “They are warning.”

He tried to keep hope lit like the fire, always burning, even if low. He walked among the people, touching shoulders, speaking to each by name.

“We will endure,” he said. “The old ones did. So will we. If not by cattle, then by stone. If not by root, then by fire and song.”

But even he could see the doubt in their eyes. And he whispered in the dark.

“Spirits who watched our fathers, guide us now. Speak through the fire. Tell me how to keep my people.”

In the far corner of the cave, beyond the reach of the fire's dim light, the elder sat with the giants — Mázahú and Chaská crouched low, their broad shoulders hunched like great stone figures carved into the rock. Tokánhi and Wíyak'a lingered nearby, listening but silent for now. The breath of the storm outside pressed into the cave's mouth like an angry beast, howling against the wall of hides and stone. The fire had weakened, its flames shrinking from the wind's touch. Shadows flickered like ghosts.

Mázahú leaned forward, his voice a low murmur. "This man came and brought trouble with him from the north lands. With him, the storms came. The rain changed after his arrival. So did the sky."

Chaská grunted softly. "The signs do not lie. Spirits are restless. Maybe it is the stranger they want. Maybe... they wait for a sacrifice. Our fathers bled for the land when it turned against them. Blood was the oldest voice. It made the spirits listen."

The elder's eyes did not flinch. He sat still, pipe in hand, unlit.

"No," he said. "He is suffering just like we are. He did not bring the change. He was running from it, just as we are. The change is not a shadow tied to one man's feet. It is in the sky now, in the wind, in the water. It is wide, like smoke across the forest. He did not make this."

Chaská frowned. "Still, the old ways say—"

"The old ways say we honor those who come to our fire," the elder cut him off. His voice was calm but sharp, like flint. "He is our guest. And guests are sacred. Even in hunger, even in storm. If we lose our honor, we are not a tribe anymore. Just animals hiding from the sky."

Silence held the space. The wind screamed beyond the wall.

Mázahú lowered his gaze, rubbing a hand over his mouth. Wíyak'a nodded once. Tokánhi's voice broke the stillness.

"The elder speaks with the bones of our fathers. The stranger is one of us now."

Chaská exhaled and gave a short nod, the tension in his jaw slowly fading.

"So be it."

No more words were spoken. The fire cracked once, a single flame rising before it died.

The stranger was brought a new place to rest, beside the others. Food was given — a strip of dried meat, a small bowl of roots. He took them with trembling hands and bowed his head.

That night, the sky turned foul again.

Red bled into black, clouds like bruises stretched above the canyon. The wind struck with full force, roaring into the cave like a thing with a mind, ripping at the hides and tools. A tipi that had stood near the edge was torn from its place and sucked into the darkness outside. A scream rose from the one who'd owned it — a woman — but no one could chase it. The storm owned the mouth now.

The fire went out in a sudden rush of air, leaving only shadows and the scent of smoke. In the dark, the people huddled — bodies pressed together, children clutching at their mothers, the old ones holding tight to stone for grounding.

The wind howled like a wounded wolf. A great crash of thunder rolled across the sky, so loud it felt like it cracked the air itself.

A child cried out. Another whimpered.

The elder sat among them, silent, eyes open wide. He clutched his staff in one hand, the other pressed to the stone floor. He did not speak. He did not blink. He listened.

Wíyak'a leaned in close to him, voice near his ear. "The wind... it is not just wind."

"It is the earth mourning," the elder said quietly. "It is the breath of something old, awoken."

The people said nothing. There were no more songs. No more drums. Only breath and thunder and a fire that would not light again until the storm chose to sleep.

And in that blackness, they waited.

The wind had become a living thing — not just noise or motion, but a force with hunger and violence, shrieking down the canyon like a beast of smoke and stone. Each gust slammed against the cave mouth with the weight of trees uprooted, stripping away whatever still clung to the outer walls. Skins, tools, baskets, even stones had been carried off in the storm's grip. No one now dared sleep near the front of the cave. They had all moved deeper, where the tunnels narrowed and the stone held the wind back like the ribs of the world itself.

Only the elder and the giants — Mázahú, Chaská, and Wíyak'a — dared approach the cave mouth anymore, and even then only with ropes tied tight around their chests, the other ends fastened to rock columns within the cave. The air outside sucked and howled, the pressure alone strong enough to stagger a grown man. The sky beyond was not sky anymore — not blue, not even gray, but a swirling mass of red and black, angry and bruised, alive with constant motion.

When they stepped toward the mouth that day, wind blasting their eyes with grit, their hides soaked with rain, the three men shielded their faces and leaned into the storm, crouched low. They did not go all the way — only close enough to see, to witness.

And there, through the curtains of rain and the smoke-dark sky, they saw them.

Comets.

At first only streaks — glowing lines across the wounded heavens — then more, tails long and burning, writhing in the storm winds like serpents of fire. One after another, they fell, some vanishing into the horizon, some breaking apart mid-air, others vanishing behind walls of cloud. Their light flickered in and out, casting the canyon in sudden flashes of white and gold.

Then came the sound.

Not thunder.

Not sky-voice.

But something deeper. Rolling. Endless. A boom that moved through the bones. The air trembled, and the stone beneath their feet shifted. From the cave ceiling, dust drifted like dry snow. The wind paused for one breath, then screamed anew, louder, wild with panic.

Mázahú stumbled back, gripping the rope around his waist, eyes wide. “This is it,” he shouted above the roar. “This is the time of change! My forefathers spoke of it — tens of generations back! The burning sky! The storms! The beasts crying out in the night! This has happened before!”

He turned to the others, voice trembling. “The earth is violent now. The people will perish. Everywhere. Animals will die out. Fire will cover the skies. Darkness will fall.”

Wíyak’a pressed himself against the wall, eyes still turned upward. “These are not storms. These are signs. The bones of the sky are breaking.”

Chaská’s face was pale beneath the dust and rain. “What do we do? We cannot climb out. We cannot go deeper forever.”

The elder stood still, rain streaming down his weathered face, robes clinging to his frame. He said nothing for a long while. His pipe was gone — no fire could survive this wind. Only the silence of his eyes remained.

Finally, he spoke, but his voice was low. “We are in the belly of the change. We were born into it, perhaps chosen for it... or forgotten in it.”

Mázahú dropped to a crouch, covering his head as another roll of thunder swept through the canyon. “There is no place left untouched. If the comets strike the earth, they will kill the land. No plants. No rivers. The sky will carry ash. All this will be buried.”

The elder looked toward the sky one last time, eyes tracing the comet tails burning against the dark red, and then turned back toward the cave’s safety.

“We cannot fight the sky,” he said. “But we can witness. We can remember. If something survives, they will need to know the end.”

The giants followed him into the dark, the storm clawing behind them.

The tunnel had become their world now — stone pressing close on all sides, the ceiling low enough that even the giants moved with bent backs. Firelight flickered weakly against the damp walls, revealing soot-darkened handprints and old mineral veins like frozen tears. Piles of wood lay stacked nearby, once plentiful, now reduced to thin bundles of brittle branches. The crack of burning timber sounded hollow, as if the fire itself knew it was being fed with the bones of their shelter.

When the wood ran low, they broke apart the frames of their tipis. Poles that had held homes for generations were snapped and fed to the flames one by one. Each crack echoed through the tunnel. No one spoke while it happened. Some women turned their faces away. Children stared, silent, understanding more than anyone wished.

Weeks had passed in darkness and storm. The food was counted now not by baskets, but by days. A week remained. Perhaps less. Hunger crept into bodies slowly, dull and gnawing, making movements heavy and thoughts dark. Some of the old ones hummed verses meant for the spirits of death, barely audible, melodies passed down for moments when breath thinned and the path narrowed.

Suddenly a sound unlike anything before hit— deeper than thunder, heavier than the sky itself. The earth lurched. Stone screamed. The ground heaved beneath them, and the ceiling split with a violent crack. Dust and shards of rock exploded downward. A boulder tore free and smashed against the wall, breaking apart in a cloud of stone.

The blast wave followed — a brutal rush of air that slammed into bodies like a giant’s hand. Men and women were thrown from their feet. Some struck the walls hard, the breath torn from their lungs, ears ringing with a high, empty whine. A child cried out, then fell silent, stunned. For a moment, there was only chaos and pain.

Then the dust came.

It poured into the tunnel like smoke, thick and choking, blotting out the firelight. People clawed at their throats, coughing, retching, eyes burning. Some pressed their faces into hides soaked with water, others crawled blindly, calling names they could not hear answered. The air tasted of stone and death.

The dust did not settle quickly. Hours passed — ten, perhaps more — with the tunnel wrapped in a gray shroud. When the air finally thinned enough to see shapes again, everyone was coated in pale grit, hair stiff, lips cracked, eyes red and swollen.

No one asked what had happened. They all knew.

Quietly, with shaking hands, they gathered what remained — the last baskets of meat, the final jars of roots, hides, tools worn smooth by years of use. They moved deeper into the cave system, away from the shattered chamber, into passages narrower and older, where the stone felt colder and more final.

Třatřánka Iyúhapi walked last. From a niche in the wall he took a small leather bag, heavy with dried tobacco. He held it for a moment, then tucked it close to his chest. That, at least, remained.

When they settled in the new chamber, the fire was lit again — smaller now, careful, guarded. The people gathered around it, faces hollow, eyes reflecting the flames.

The elder sat, pipe in hand, and spoke at last.

“My dear people,” he said, his voice steady despite the weight it carried, “this is our last time. Our food is nearly gone. The world outside has broken. Many tribes have already vanished into dust and hunger. The spirits will not spare us. There is nothing left to gather. No animals walk. No roots rise. Soon, only water will remain.”

A woman sobbed aloud. Another clutched her child and rocked back and forth. Some men lowered their heads and began to sing quietly, a low chant that trembled like wind through dead grass.

The elder said no more. He lit his pipe, drawing the smoke deep into his lungs, then let it drift upward into the dark stone above. He hummed softly — an old song, older than the canyon walls, a song of forefathers who walked into night with dignity and memory intact.

The fire burned low.

The days that followed passed without measure. No sun marked them, no birds called, no changing light graced the cave to remind them that time still moved. Time had slowed now, aligned itself with the quiet rhythm of death that had settled among them like an unseen mist. The last of the food had been portioned in silence, one handful here, one root there, passed hand to hand without words. No one asked for more. No one complained. They ate with humility, some bowing their heads before eating, others holding the food in their palms for a moment, as if thanking the earth before placing it in their mouths.

Then there was nothing left but water.

Water was fetched from the cold spring deep in the tunnel. It was pure still, but no longer felt like life. It was the last thread holding breath inside ribcages. Fasting began without announcement. The strong sat longer, the weak lay still more often, eyes dim, breathing shallow. Children began to fall asleep and not wake. One by one, their still forms were wrapped in hides and laid in a quiet alcove near the tunnel wall. The women no longer wept. There were no tears left.

The elder sat less often by the fire now. His pipe was used sparingly. The scent of the smoke, once comforting, now hung like a ghost above the dwindling flame. He smoked only when his body felt too heavy to stand.

Tokánhi sat one night with knees drawn close, voice rasped and quiet.

“Remember when the grass was green,” he said, his eyes half closed, lips cracked, “when the goats grazed, the women picked herbs, and the fire was warm each evening. We sang. Danced. The sky opened wide above us and the eagle flew without fear.”

Chaská stirred beside him, the bones in his shoulders pressing through the skin. He nodded slowly.

“There was always food,” Tokánhi continued. “Voices laughing. Children chasing each other in the dust. We told stories until the stars blinked out. Even if this is the end, at least we lived then. As best as we could.”

The elder’s voice answered from the shadows.

“Yes,” he said. “We only get as much as the world allows us. When it calls, we must resign. Nothing else can be done. Death walks alongside this world, not behind it. It is a brother to the wind, a brother to the stone. We served these bodies with what the land gave us. We danced, we prayed, we ate when food came. Now the deep sleep comes.”

He fell quiet again. No one responded.

Mázahú lay with his arms crossed over his chest, his breath shallow but steady. Wíyak’a’s eyes were closed, but his lips moved in a quiet murmur — a prayer or a song, it was unclear. Chaská stared into the fire, his face unreadable. All four giants lay still afterward, limbs heavy with exhaustion and hunger.

The elder lay on his back near the stone wall, his hands on his chest, eyes open to the dark above. The cave ceiling, rough with stalactites, was hidden in shadow. He did not blink for a long while.

Outside, the storm had become more than wind.

It screamed now — a voice of the sky split open. Tornadoes raged through the canyon, their howls shrieking between the stone walls like creatures blind with fury. The sky had turned the color of blood soaked into ash, red streaks writhing through black stormclouds. Comets fell more frequently now — once or twice a day, their fire visible even through cloud, their impact felt in the bones.

Some broke apart high above, scattered into flaming embers. Others struck the land far off, where echoes rolled in deep waves that trembled through the stone of the cave, knocking

dust loose again and again. The air vibrated each time — not like thunder, but like the breath of something enormous.

The people did not speak of it anymore. They had seen enough signs.

Only the wind now, and the dying of the world.

The elder closed his eyes, and in the silence after the wind's scream, he began to hum again. The same song, the one of the forefathers. A song no longer of survival — only of witness.

They had become twenty. Twenty figures spread thin across the cold stone of the inner tunnel, cloaked in silence and thin hides, unmoving save for the occasional twitch of a limb or rasp of breath. The others—children, elders, even strong men—had passed in the days prior, claimed softly in their sleep, taken without struggle. Their bodies were wrapped and moved aside with reverence, untouched. Hunger thinned reverence, but did not break it.

In one corner of the tunnel, a man crouched over the last embers of the fire, his hands shaking as he stirred a small pot of boiled hide. It was the skin of an old goat, once used to patch a tent. He'd torn it into strips and dropped it in the water, waiting for it to soften. The steam rose slow and scentless. His face was hollow, sunken. He did not speak. He did not hope. He only waited for the water to change into something he could swallow.

The elder sat apart from the rest, his legs crossed, his spine straight despite the weight of days. His eyes remained closed. Each breath drawn was measured, slow, deliberate. His lips moved faintly in a song heard only by the inside of his skull, a quiet humming carried in thought, not air. His spirit walked elsewhere now — along green rivers under blue skies, among herds of bison so large they covered the plains, under constellations that smiled, not warned.

"This is not death," he thought. "This is the door."

Mázahú lay on his side, ribs showing under stretched skin, eyes open but seeing little. He had not spoken in two days. Now, words formed in his skull slowly, like echoes in stone.

"If we ate the flesh of the dead, we might live," he thought, then blinked once and turned his head. "But they were my brothers. Their blood was my blood. We came from the same fire. Better to go silent than break that fire."

Chaská lay nearby, staring up into the stone, unmoving. His mind moved in circles.

"I am too big for this," he thought. "Too big to starve like a bird. My bones are heavy. I feel them. If I had meat, I could carry twenty. I could walk to where the rain falls. But there is none. My hands are still. I do not want to die. But I will not crawl."

Wíyak'a chewed on a strip of rawhide tied around his wrist, not for food, just to keep his jaw moving. He listened to the faint wind. His thoughts wandered.

“Maybe the cave will collapse. Maybe the ceiling will fall and bury us all. That would be fast. Better than hunger. We should not be here. We should have left sooner. But where would we have gone?”

On the far side of the chamber, three women lay close, their bodies thin as shadows, arms across one another. One woman pulled at her hair slowly, strand by strand, lips moving with no sound. Another chewed at her nails, eyes open wide.

“I do not want to see another die,” the first thought. “I do not want to hear the sound again, the breath leaving. It is always the same. Slow, soft, and then silence.”

The third woman had her eyes closed, her hands crossed over her chest. Her face was calm. She did not move. Her thoughts came like whispers.

“My son is waiting. He is running in green grass. I see him. I hear him laugh. When I sleep, I will run with him. He will take my hand. There is food there. There is water.”

The fire was gone now — no more wood. Only a faint red glow in the ashes. It did not light the chamber. The tunnel was in half-darkness. The only sound was the occasional shifting of a body, a cough, a soft gasp.

The wind outside still howled, but its scream was distant. Here, in the earth’s marrow, there was only the weight of stillness.

Thátthánka Iyúhapi sat like a stone, unmoved, unbreathing for long stretches. He was not sleeping. His mind walked.

“The body is a garment. The earth made it. The earth will take it. What matters walks out of it, and on, and on. My fathers are waiting. The land there is green. The animals do not fear. The rivers are clear. The songs are never forgotten.”

He hummed again in his mind.

A song without words.

A farewell.

The tunnel lay in half-darkness, the last embers breathing faint red like dying eyes. No one spoke. No one moved. Bodies lay wrapped in skins, thin chests rising and falling so slowly it was hard to know if breath still lived inside them. Death had settled fully now, not as panic, but as weight — a stone laid gently across the soul.

Tokánhi lay on his side, his fingers barely curled into the edge of a hide. His thoughts drifted in broken circles. His mouth was dry. His limbs felt distant, no longer fully his. Then something shifted.

At the far end of the tunnel, where the stone narrowed into deeper darkness, a shadow moved.

Tokánhi's eyes opened wider, though his body would not obey. "This is it," he thought. "The visions come now." His heart did not race. There was no fear left for that. Only a tired awareness.

The shadow moved closer.

Then it stepped into the weak glow of the embers.

It was tall. Taller than a man when standing fully upright. Its body was narrow and jointed, dark and chitinous, shaped like a man but not of man. Its head was large, angled, with wide, faceted eyes that caught the ember light and reflected it back coldly. Two long feelers rose from its head, twitching slowly, tasting the air. Its arms ended in fine, precise hands. It clicked softly, a sound like stone tapped with bone.

Tokánhi stared.

The creature leaned closer, tilting its head, studying him with slow interest. It made another clicking sound, softer this time.

Behind it, more shapes emerged.

One by one, others stepped from the tunnel's depths — ant-people, their movements careful, deliberate, ancient. They spread through the chamber, moving among the dying bodies without sound. One knelt and set down a leather bag. Another untied it.

Beans spilled onto the stone floor.

The smell struck first — dry, earthy, real. Tokánhi's body reacted before thought. His fingers twitched. Nearby, a woman stirred. A man gasped and pushed himself onto his elbows. Hunger roared back into existence like a fire relit.

People crawled.

Hands shook as they grabbed the beans, stuffing them into mouths without words, chewing desperately, coughing, swallowing. Strength returned not fully, but enough — a spark. A pulse. Breath deepened. Eyes focused again. Moans turned into sobs.

Třathánka lyúhapi opened his eyes.

He did not recoil. He did not speak. He simply watched.

Slowly, with effort, he rose to his feet. His legs trembled, but held. He stepped forward and bowed low, his forehead touching the stone.

The others followed — giants, women, men — bowing as best they could with weakened bodies, pressing themselves to the earth in gratitude and awe.

One of the ant-people stepped forward. Its voice came not loud, but clear, shaped strangely, as if stone itself had learned speech.

“We are peoples of the deep,” it said. “The world above is no place for your kind any longer. Few of you survive. The surface is breaking. Fire falls. Waters turn bitter. If you wish to live, you must come with us. We will lead you down. Into the deep.”

Třatřánka Iyúhapi raised his head. His eyes were wet, but steady.

“My people are thankful beyond words,” he said. “We will follow your lead. This is our only way to survive now.”

As he spoke, memory stirred.

A voice from long ago. His grandfather’s voice, low by an evening fire, telling a story half-whispered, half-forgotten — of beings beneath the world who walked when the sky burned, who opened stone when the land failed, who carried life through darkness. As a boy, he had thought it a spirit tale, a comfort story for fearful nights.

Now the stone itself had answered.

Into the Deep

The ant-people turned toward the deeper tunnels, their feelers lifting, their bodies already moving.

And the survivors, fed once more, rose unsteadily to follow.

The beans had worked their small miracle. Strength, though fragile, returned to limbs once bound by stillness. After hours of rest and eating slowly under the gaze of the ant beings, the people rose, one by one, shoulders stooped but moving again. Faces hollowed by hunger now bore a flicker of life, something like the shape of hope not spoken aloud, but felt in the chest like a dull warmth.

The ants stood silently at the edge of the chamber. Then, with slow gestures and subtle nods, they turned and began walking deeper into the tunnels.

The people followed.

Torches were lit. Mázahú struck his flint carefully, fire springing to life at the tip of a pitch-soaked branch. Others followed suit. Wíyak’a carried one, and Tokánhi another, their lights

swaying against the rock like restless stars. The elder moved quietly among them, his step slow but even, his tobacco bag clutched tightly beneath one arm, his pipe held in the other.

The tunnel narrowed. The rock changed color. The ground turned more uneven, and at places they had to climb — sharp ridges, jagged cracks, places where water had long ago carved paths that no longer ran. The ant people moved quickly, their limbs designed for such terrain, sometimes scaling the walls sideways or even upside down, feelers brushing the ceiling as they clicked softly to one another in tones impossible to understand.



But always, they paused — waiting at turns, glancing back with their great unblinking eyes to ensure the humans had not fallen behind. Their pace was unhurried, patient. They had seen many things, these deep beings. The collapse of worlds perhaps. What was one more procession of fading light?

Mázahú climbed over a jagged ledge and reached down to help Chaská, whose limbs still ached from the long fasting.

“We are walking into the bones of the world,” Chaská muttered, gripping his brother’s hand.

“It is better than dying in the dark,” Mázahú replied. “I thought I would die in silence... but now I hear footsteps again. That is enough.”

Behind them, a woman leaned against the wall, catching her breath, her child cradled against her chest. Tokánhi passed her and paused. “Can you walk?” he asked.

She nodded weakly. "I can now."

He smiled. "Then walk. The land above is dying. But maybe the earth has a second skin."

Ahead, Wíyak'a lifted his torch toward a vaulted passage where the walls widened. Shadows moved like ghosts across the stone. The air smelled different — less of rot, more of ancient minerals and something sharp, like metal that had never touched fire.

"Their home must be deep," he said, glancing back. "Far from the touch of sky."

The elder said nothing for a long while. He walked in the middle of the group, his steps measured, eyes tracing the moving legs of the ant people ahead.

Finally he spoke, softly, to no one in particular.

"They knew we were here. They came when all other spirits were silent. Perhaps they are not of the spirit world, but they walk with its weight."

Tokánhi turned slightly. "Do you think they'll keep us? Let us live among them?"

The elder's pipe remained unlit. "If they give food, if they share water, if they let us sleep under their stone — then they are kin now."

The tunnel grew steeper. In one place, they had to pass through a crack barely wide enough to squeeze through sideways. The ant people moved easily, almost sliding between the walls. The humans followed, pressed close, breath loud in the tight stone.

As they emerged into a slightly wider path, one of the ant beings paused and pointed ahead, a clicking sound issuing from deep within its body. Its eyes caught the torchlight and flared briefly with iridescent green.

The elder raised his chin and nodded.

"Lead on," he said. "We are following the path the world left open for us."

And so they descended deeper, torchlight flickering, footsteps echoing into stone untouched by the sun since the beginning. Hope did not speak loudly yet, but it walked now — one foot behind the other — no longer dead.

For many days, the people moved through the underworld, their steps echoing down the long stone corridors carved by time and claw. The ants led without hurry, always ahead with their slow, purposeful gait, sometimes walking across walls or ceilings with no effort. The humans followed as best they could, stopping when the ants stopped, sleeping when the ants curled in stillness. The rhythm of survival had returned, quiet and careful, built from the silence of the deep.

When they rested, they shared the beans — handfuls passed around, eaten slowly in the torchlight. The food was simple, but the strength it gave made each mouthful sacred. They drank from hidden underground springs, clear and cold. When the torches dimmed, they relit them from the old embers they carried, the fire their last gift from the world above.

They crossed black rivers whose currents were silent and deep, their waters invisible in the dark. At times, they moved through massive natural caverns where the roof rose so high the torchlight could not find it. In other tunnels, the walls pressed tight, lined with spider webs like silver strings shivering in the torchlight. The earth smelled of fungus and root, of dark soil untouched by sun.

The people spoke little.

The tunnels, they came to understand, were old — impossibly old. They were not random caves but vast networks carved by design, smooth in places, ribbed in others, built by a will that predated all men. Before fire, before tools, the ants had lived here, tunneled, shaped, remembered. This was not their hiding place. It was their world.

Then, at last, the tunnel widened.

The ants ahead clicked and gestured, and the people stepped into a vast open space, their torches lighting only a small part of what stretched before them. A scent of warm fungus, earth, and life filled the air. It was hot — not stifling, but alive with deep warmth rising from far below. Breathing it made limbs loosen and hunger quiet for a moment.

Before them lay the ant city.

Burrows rose in soft dome shapes from the floor, entrances dark and smooth. Tunnels crisscrossed between them like roots or veins. Ants moved everywhere — hundreds of them, each taller than a man, some carrying long white eggs, others bundles of plant roots or strange fruits. In one chamber, glowing with a blue mineral light, mushrooms larger than a child's head grew in perfect lines. Elsewhere, guards with spears stood silently, their armor thick and dark, eyes unmoving. No speech, no laughter — only movement, precise and steady, the work of a civilization that had no need for noise.

Above them, some ants moved across the walls in high tunnels. Others descended through pits that dropped into blackness with no end.

The lead ant, who had guided them since the canyon, turned and gestured with a slow arm toward a great cavern carved into the rock wall to the left. It was open and tall, warm and lit by glowing fungus embedded into the stone.

"Here is your new dwelling place," came the ant's voice, shaped through clicking and breath. "You may live here and rest."

Třatřánka Iyúhapi stepped forward. His pipe was in his hand, unlit. His eyes scanned the vastness — the tunnels, the workers, the silent order. He bowed deeply.

“We thank you, people of the deep,” he said. “Your kindness is greater than the mountains. We will live quietly, as guests under your stone.”

Behind him, the others entered the cavern. They touched the walls, sat on the dark earth, looked at the glowing lights with wonder. Some cried quietly, not from sorrow now, but from the loosening of fear.

Mázahú whispered, “We’ve come to the second world. The old stories... they were true.”

Chaská touched one of the glowing fungus lights with a finger. “The fire inside the earth,” he said. “It’s warm like a summer night.”

Tokánhi sat beside large clay tubs and ran a hand along the stone floor. “No wind. No ash. No storm. Just... stone.”

Wíyak’a looked up at the high tunnels, where ants moved in steady lines. “They live like the stars. Always moving. Always working. No waste. No fight.”

Deeper inside the ant city, larger guardians stood motionless in front of a narrow, spiraling tunnel — the way to the queen, though none would speak of it. Far below that, through chambers unlit and unknowable, others still worked in the black — in regions no human eyes had ever seen, and perhaps never would.

But here, in this chamber, the clan of the canyon people breathed again. Safe, for now, beneath the ruined world.

The days turned into weeks, and weeks into months. The surface, once their sky and home, faded in memory like a bad dream softened by sleep. In the warm underworld, life settled into rhythm once more. The ant people brought silk — soft, dry strands woven from spider webs gathered in the far tunnels, aged and cleaned in the chambers of their making. The humans laid it on the stone and slept on it, wrapped in the soft hush of the deep. No wind here, no thunder. Only silence and the rustle of hundreds of legs moving with purpose.

They were fed, too — carefully, without waste. The ants brought pale fungus, some with deep purple caps, others white and veined like thin skin. The taste was not like anything from above — bitter at first, but filling. Then they brought beans, but not the same as before. These were soft-shelled, shaped like small crescent stones. They were grown in rows along the warmest stone corridors, buried in black soil, watered from inside the walls.

One day, four ants led them into a chamber where these beans were cultivated. The heat here was thick. Steam rose from the stone itself, and the air smelled like earth in spring. An ant stood at the edge and showed them how to plant the beans — digging shallow with fine

tools, pressing seeds into the warm soil, covering with a dry dust they called *nurta*. The elder watched carefully, nodding.

“They grow without light,” he said, running his fingers through the soil. “They are like us now.”

Over the months, the humans’ eyes changed. No longer did they need the torches at all times. Shapes came clearer in the half-dark. Their skin grew paler, their hearing sharper. They walked with lighter steps, cautious and alert. The deep became familiar. When they wandered now, it was not with fear but with quiet awe.

They explored the older tunnels — long-forgotten paths that led off from the main burrows. Some were silent and still. Others breathed warm air from deep chambers below. In some places, the walls glittered: veins of gold, of silver, of old things the ants had no use for. Tokánhi ran his hand along one wall and said softly, “We used to fight over this. Now we walk past it without care.”

The elder only replied, “We have no hunger for shining things now. Only for life.”

One day, a large ant led them beyond the usual living chambers, through a tunnel that sloped downward and narrowed until it opened suddenly to a vast hollow space. The air was cooler here. And in the center, there lay a black lake — still, wide, untouched. Its surface did not ripple. It reflected no light, only the void above it.

The humans stood at its edge, their breath quiet.

Mázahú stepped in first, removing his clothes and sliding into the water. The others followed — slowly, carefully. The water was cold and clear, but not bitter. It wrapped around them like night. They washed their bodies, rubbed stone dust from their skin, and drank the cool stillness in silence.

One of the older ants, smaller than the rest but with long feelers and mottled skin, sat at the edge and watched. When the people had finished swimming and were gathered along the shore, the ant clicked softly and then began to speak in shaped sound.

“Once, long ago, the world above changed,” it said. “Like now. Fire fell. Rain turned bitter. The land cracked. That time, too, many died.”

The people listened, quiet.

“We found others. Like you. They were called the First People. We brought them down, as we brought you. They lived. Some... remained with us. They made new homes. They learned our ways. They no longer needed the sun. They walked on four limbs. They grew their own fungus. They became something else.”

Wíyak’a asked softly, “Are they still here?”

The ant's head turned slightly. "Some are deep. Some are far. They are people of the deep now. Different. But not lost."

"And the others?" Tokánhi asked.

"When the sun returned, and the earth cooled... others climbed back. They found the land new, strange. But they remembered. They became again the ones who walked in grass."

The elder stood silent for a time, then nodded.

"We remember nothing," he said. "But you remember everything. You hold our past for us."

The ant clicked once. "We remember the stone. You remember the sky."

That night, the people sat in their silk beds, stomachs full, the warmth of the earth around them. The world above had ended, but here, in the dark, something else had begun.

Deep in the stone-wrapped quiet, where warmth rose not from fire but the hidden veins of the world, Třathánka Iyúhapi sat cross-legged in his silk bedding and lit his pipe. The smoke curled in the stale air, swirling slow, bending like roots toward the rough ceiling above. Across from him sat one of the elder ants, smaller than the guards, its body marked with dark segments of age, feelers long and twitching, mandibles slow and patient.

The man smoked in silence a long time before speaking.

"Tell me... who are your people?" he asked, voice low, words steady in the hush of the underworld.

The ant turned its head slightly, the eyes reflecting the faint glow of torch light.

"We are the Anu Sinom," it said, its voice shaped carefully for human understanding. "That is what we were called... long ago. In another sky."

Třathánka Iyúhapi's fingers stilled on the pipe. He leaned forward slightly, lips parting but not speaking yet.

"Our world was dying," the ant continued. "Not from war. Not from poison. But from change. Like your world above now. Sotuknang was our guide. He was one who came through the darkness of space and brought us on this planet."

"Before humans?" the man asked.

"Long before," came the answer. "The surface was not suitable that time, the earth was primordial and still forming, then the ant people dug deep underground, found ways to survive, started cultivating fungus and drank from the dark waters of the earth. Then we multiplied."

The pipe crackled. Smoke moved across the chamber like breath.

“We were not the only ones,” the ant said. “Some ant brothers went to live in other parts of the deep earth, digging their own dwellings. But we are of one beginning.”

Třatřąka Iyúhapi exhaled slowly. “My great-grandfather once said the star people are many. That some visit. That some live still beyond our knowing.”

The ant nodded once. “Yes the vast space above holds many creatures in star systems, they are all different kind, some moving to new planets, some living from times unknown in their natural environment circling next to stars.”

The old man’s heart beat slow but loud. The stories passed in low voices around old fires rose in him now like smoke from the pipe. He remembered the words of his grandfather — strange beings of great height, those who shone in dreams, the visitors of the old times.

“Do they still come?” he asked.

“Sometimes,” the ant replied. “Not all visit the surface. It is unstable for them. The watchers keep distance. Others... live deeper.”

Then the ant stood, turned slightly, and gestured.

“Come. I will show.”

They walked together through a side tunnel, narrow and steep. The glow from the chambers faded, and they walked in near-darkness for some time until they reached a wide opening that looked down into the black. A pit. Not like the others. This was not carved by the ants. It was older. Natural, or something else. The smell of old earth rose from it — cold and damp and strange.

“That goes hundreds of miles down,” the ant said. “We do not go there now. Not often.”

Třatřąka Iyúhapi peered down. He could not see the bottom. It felt like the mouth of another world.

“There are the depth burrowers,” said the ant. “Giant worms who are as old as earth itself and dark creatures from primordial times who dwell in the depths, not all of them benevolent beings.”

The old man’s voice barely came. “Are they like you?”

“No. Not shaped like us. Some with no shape. Some with too many. We fought once. They did not want us here. But we did not leave. Now they tolerate us.”

He stepped back from the pit.

“Not all who live in the deep are friendly,” the ant said. “But not all are enemies either. The world below is wide.”

Tǎthǎŋka Iyúhapi said nothing for a while. His eyes remained on the pit, wide and still.

“The world above burns,” he murmured. “The world below whispers.”

The ant gave a slow click, its eyes steady.

“You are in the silence now,” it said. “But there are many echoes in it.”

They walked back to the chamber in silence, the pipe still warm in the old man’s hand. The smoke of it curled behind him, thin as memory, winding through tunnels dug before any man had walked beneath the sun.

Years flowed slowly like the deep black river that wound through the hidden stone veins of the underworld. The people, once starved and lost, began to grow again. Children were born, their cries faint echoes in the vastness of carved stone chambers, their hair a mingling of bloodlines — deep dark shades and streaks of ancient red, the mark of the giants carried forward in quiet strength. Laughter returned to the tunnels, soft and fleeting, yet real.

The clan worked in rhythm with the ant people, cultivating the strange beans and tending to fungus gardens. They swam in the black lake when the heat pressed close, gathered water in clay jars, raised their young in silk beds lined with soft stone powder. Some tunnels became homes, others storage, some places for stories. They got used to the darkness.

Tǎthǎŋka Iyúhapi grew slower with each passing season. His voice thinned, though it still held the calm weight of the old times. One day, he stayed in his bed of silk, not rising. His pipe was beside him, filled but unlit. Around him gathered Mázahú and Chaská, Tokánhi and Wíyak’a, and others of the clan. Children peeked from behind their mothers. The hum of life slowed as they all listened.

“My children,” Tǎthǎŋka Iyúhapi said, his voice rough as dry bark, “I am about to leave. The fire in me grows dim. But my heart is full. You are here. You have lived. That is enough.” He drew breath, shallow and thin. “Take care of each other. Watch the little ones. Multiply. Be patient. No one knows how long you must remain beneath the world... but one day, maybe... maybe the sky will clear. Maybe grass will grow again.”

Mázahú stepped forward and placed a hand on the elder’s shoulder. “We will care for them. We will not let your work fade. You led us here. You gave us this life.”

Chaská bowed his head low. “You brought us through death. We will remember.”

That night, Tǎthǎŋka Iyúhapi passed. No cry echoed. Only silence — respectful, thick, sacred. The ant people stood still, motionless in the outer chamber, eyes dimmed. In a line of quiet movement, the humans carried him through the tunnels, past the fungus halls, to the edge of the black lake. There, beside its unmoving waters, they buried him. A carved headstone, smoothed by Tokánhi’s hands and tools, stood watch. His name marked in memory.

The people returned, heavy with feeling but not lost. That night, stories were told — of the elder who smoked under stars, who walked the plains, who sang to the wind and spoke with spirits, who guided them into the stone and led them away from death. The children listened wide-eyed, and the old ones repeated his words with reverence. He became more than memory — he became root and foundation.

Time did not stop. The clan lived on, deeper into the earth, adapting and growing in the shadow of ancient stone. Life continued not in joy or sorrow alone, but in the still balance between survival and silence.

Above, the world burned and broke.

Storms never ceased. The sun was veiled forever. Comets split the sky and buried themselves in land that would never bear fruit again. Winds screamed over dead mountains, carving valleys of ash. No tree stood. No river ran. The ground trembled often, and the sky was thick with smoke. No bird flew. No voice called. Only the darkness remained, turning the surface into a graveyard of a time that once was.

But far below, in the roots of the world, a people lived still.

They lit no fires for fear of smoke, but their tunnels glowed with life. They sang softly in a tongue of old clans. They planted seeds with patient fingers and waited. Beneath stone and silence, they endured.

And the world above forgot them.